

The “Healing Touch” of Nature: Corresponding Elements in the Poetry of William Wordsworth and Jibanananda Das

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Abstract

This paper endeavours to find resonances between Wordsworth's treatment and responses to Nature and Jibanananda's fascination with rural Bengal. A lecturer in English, he tried to bring the West to the Bengali psyche and consciousness utilizing the unique strategy of de-familiarizing the Bengali landscape. In effecting this achievement Jibanananda's familiarity with English poetry is of paramount importance. He has analogical and genealogical similarities with Keats and Wordsworth's particularly Wordsworth, in the celebrations of solitude, of nature.

Keywords- Poetry, Nature, Escape, Countryside, Ecology

Introduction

There are close affinities in the poetic discourse concerning the nature and objectives of “true” poetry-Wordsworth in his Preface To the Lyrical Ballads and Jibanananda in two separate Bengali articles-Kobitar Kotha (the story of poetry) and Keno Likhi (Why I Write). The output of both poets, in terms of form and content, bears testimony to turbulent contemporary developments in society along with Nature as a theme and symbol of peace and tranquillity. The role of both poets as social commentators however varies in degrees-Jibanananda’s position being slightly muted and understated. Nature plays an important role in honing the poetic sensibilities of both poets-for Wordsworth it is the English countryside and for Jibanananda rural Bengal referred to affectionately as Bengal the Beautiful.

1.1. “Let Nature Be thy guide”; Emergence of Nature as a Significant Poetic Device

“Nature” meant many things to the Romantics, it was often presented as itself a work of art, constructed by a divine imagination, in emblematic language. While particular perspectives with regards to Nature varied considerably; Nature is perceived as a healing power, a source of subject and image, a refuge from the artificial constructs of civilization, including artificial language, the prevailing views accorded Nature the status of an organically unified whole. It was viewed as “organic”, rather than as in the scientific or rationalist view, as a system of “mechanical” laws. Romanticism displaced the rationalist view of the universe as a machine with the analogue of an “organic” image, a living tree or mankind itself. At the same time, Romantics gave greater attention both to describing natural phenomena accurately and to capturing “sensuous nuance” and this is as true of Romantic landscape painting.

So as mechanisms and themes Nature and Sensation can somewhat encompass most of Jibanananda’s poetry- a trait which echoes an earlier definition from Charles Baudelaire ‘Romanticism is precisely situated neither in choice of subject nor exact truth but in the way of feeling’.

The Romantic emphasis on the individual was reflected in ideas of self-realization and Nature. Wordsworth thought that the individual could directly understand Nature without the need for society and social artifice, salvation is achieved by the solitary individual rather than through political movement.

Both poets have some resonances-for Wordsworth though he would write of ‘Nightingales in some shady haunt’ and the exotic Arabian desert he could never leave the Lake District in his imagination Jibanananda would add the Pyramid, Assyria, Babylon but come back to rural Bengal-“I will return to Bengal”. Interestingly ,in his literary notes titled “Dinlipi” Jibanananda while analysing Matthew Arnold’s Nature poetry focusses on **Wordsworth’s poems of Nature- • Dinlipi 1 Entry 10 :**

M.A.’s (Matthew Arnold) poetry may be said to be a reaction against the spirit of the 19th century Romantics – (especially of Shelley, Byron and Keats). Arnold attempted to revive Hellenism – but not in the manner of Keats. His model was that of the ancient Greeks. M.A. was the disciple and interpreter of Wordsworth, and it quite necessarily follows that he should be by the nature-philosophy of Wordsworth; as a matter of fact, Arnold’s study and

interpretation of nature differs from Wordsworth's. He has the Wordsworthian tranquillity no doubt, but nothing of Wordsworth's sense of bliss, and nothing of his detachment and optimism. Wordsworth's philosophy of Nature... He says... to me that the meanest flower that blows... the small celandine teaches him a lesson. The cuckoo begets for him the golden hours of youth. The daffodils... for often... bliss of solitude. And Wordsworth's philosophy of Nature... Any such bliss or healing message from Nature M.A. cannot derive. Rather as Mr Walker says – 'for the study of optimism of Wordsworth is substituted in Arnold the sense that this human life – though bearable seems hardly worth'. Arnold's nature study is very accurate and illustrates the conscientiousness of his intellect. His study of flowers, mountains, lakes, roads, rivers is all located and painted with accuracy and precision. The foundation of his accuracy, says Mr Walker, lies in the loving minuteness with which he notes the facts to nature

Nature in Arnold

Much of Arnold's youth was passed in the lake country, where his father had a country house and in a very real sense, he is the heritage of Wordsworth. To quote S. Brooke "He describes the thing he sees – flower or bird, stream or hill, exactly as they are, without humanizing them, without veiling them with any sentiment of their own... For the first time, this vision of Nature enters into English poetry with Arnold. He sees the loveliness of her doings, but he also sees their terror and dreadfulness and their relentlessness. But what in his poetry he chiefly sees is the peace of Nature's obedience to the law – the everlasting youth of her unchanging life." He was not faithful to the scientific view of her. His conception of her wavered with his mood. He sometimes is a sort of revision to Wordsworth, speaks of her as powerful to help him.

Like Hartman, and later Harold Bloom, Abrams read Wordsworth as a theodicean (someone who believes in Providence) and apocalyptic poet who envisioned a 'marriage between mind and nature' capable of inaugurating a new, 'holy' and renovated world figured through biblical language and history. Jibanananda's poems are haunted by the modernist's desire to escape. Jibanananda is a silent, perceptive, observer, saying this is how it should be, yet it is not. The poem 'Saratsar' – 'Now there is nothing here there is nothing anymore... only the pure morning remains'... And the poem "Give me a Word" Give me a word which is as

vast deep easy as the sky.” articulate a deep connection with Nature- a deep reliance on Nature. In the context of Bengali poetry,

1.2 Affinities in the conception of Nature as a Poetic Device

In “An Acre of Green Grass” Bose draws our attention to the fact that Jibanananda disregards the conventional backdrop and creates a world of shadows - the mouse, the owl and the bat. All things concealed, hidden attract him. Most of his poems are of birds and beasts, even when he praises Bonolata Sen- he describes her eyes “like bird’s nests”. He is a Nature-Poet, absorbed in it in the physical sense. A Nature-worshipper but by no means a Platonist or Pantheist - he is a pagan who loves the pattern of perfection in Nature rather than in a symbolic manner. He is not content with seeing but with experiencing Nature through touch and smell.

While in identifying Wordsworth as a “Nature” poet In Prokritir Chobi/Picture of Nature poet and critic Buddhadeb Basu makes the following observation...when we, while studying literature at the university level hear of Wordsworth as a “Nature” poet we face some confusion. ...It might be argued that Wordsworth had found a living and all-pervading entity within Nature then so has Shelley. It has to be admitted that Wordsworth’s love for Nature was almost religious in ardour. ...It will be worth mentioning that Wordsworth has not written much poetry devoid of Nature and, when he has, it has not been successful. To attach the label of “Nature Poet” implies that there can be no other newer responses to Nature than that of Wordsworth... But there is a difference between poets who are inspired by Nature to unite about other experiences. But to accept the entire human experience/life through Nature is a different approach. There are very few such poets and Jibanananda is one of them...Jibanananda is a true Nature Poet. In Grey Manuscripts there are no “proper” love poems. In poems like “A few lines” the beloved is surpassed by the backdrop of Nature..The examples and signals in his poems are not thought-oriented but rather image-oriented, not a creation of thought but sensation. In all Bengali poetry, he is the least “philosophical” and the most “physical”. This reliance on sensory perceptions links him to Keats and the Pre-Raphaelites. Tagore had identified his poetry as chitrorupamoy (like a picture) after reading Mrityur Aage/Before Death. These pictures also involve touch and smell. Even the element of taste is involved - But poets who utilize the sensory organs are often criticized.

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Samar Sen, another noted poet and critic maintains that Jibanananda's poems show an original power of expression and a keen insight into Nature.;

All of them breathe pessimism and a remote sadness. Jibanananda's poems appeal to the eye, his visual powers are extraordinary. He speaks in concrete images; the rhythm is slow, rich and strange. He has been greatly influenced by the Romantic poetry of the last century, the aesthetic melancholy of the eighteen-nineties, by the earlier Yeats. To a considerable extent, he is free from Tagore's influences, and his treatment of Nature is unique in Bengali poetry. Some of the longer poems in "Grey Manuscripts" suffer from too much Romanticism and diffuseness. But poems such as "In the Camp", "Birds", "Songs of Leisure" "Vulture" are haunting and will have a permanent place in literature. Jibanananda is primarily a poet of sensuous experience and a poet of Nature. But his sensuous awareness of Nature is not an echo of Keats, nor his love of trees, flowers and meadows a quality similar to Wordsworth's passion for the common objects of Nature. It is almost unique, although, some of his daringly concrete images remind a sensitive reader of the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Nature plays an important role in the imagery of his poems, but it is not of the ordinary kind, it is accompanied by a separation in his mind between that which he desires and the reality of the world that disappoints.

Indeed, it is Wordsworth and his close associations to Nature that can be directly linked to Jibanananda who endows mystical attributes to mundane everyday objects of Nature, especially the ordinary objects that we see in and around Bengal. Like the many topographical or landscape poems that preceded "Tintern Abbey" in the 18th century, Wordsworth's poem goes on to describe the scene in detail, appealing to our eyes and ears—the sound of "rolling" waters, the sublime impressiveness of "steep and lofty cliffs," and so forth. So the sensory organs play an important role for both poets. Both poets use extensive images from Nature-trees birds and rivers for Wordsworth-the skylark the daffodil the Thames and Wye rivers for Jibanananda-the Doel and Shalik birds Dhansiri and Kirtinasha rivers. For both Nature would act as a shield, a source of inspiration, a shelter and an escape from reality- Jibanananda has been criticized for escapism. Both would compare the city and rural life –London/Lake district and Barisal/Kolkata and long for the languid tranquil air of the rural. Marjorie Levinson identifies Wordsworth as a poet 'advocating apolitical values as

a way to 'escape' from culture; while Alan Liu reads Wordsworth's key themes— affection, love, nature, the self, imagination, time— as strategies for avoiding 'real' social problems.

Both Wordsworth and Jibanananda preferred the rural backdrop against the din and bustle of the busy city yet the city held a fascination for them. A reading of Upon Westminster Bridge and Ratri/Night would illustrate the point clearly. For Wordsworth, the appreciation of Nature goes beyond the surface. Included in this concept of Nature are the stages of maturity that the mind goes through. This consists of childhood governed by sensation, maturity governs by thought and sober reflection, and youth govern by emotions or passions as clearly illustrated in the Prelude. While for Jibanananda trying to prepare such a clear map of a linear progression of poetic thought would be challenging- his poetic themes images and diction from Dhusar Pandulipi/Grey Manuscripts to Satti Tarar Timir/The Darkness of the Seven Stars would reflect conflicting styles For both strong emotions was as an authentic source of aesthetic experience, placing new emphasis on such emotions as trepidation, horror and tension and awe. But for Wordsworth, it was akin to that which is experienced in confronting the sublimity of untamed Nature and its picturesque qualities, both new aesthetic categories. Jibanananda would use it more in his response to modern contemporary issues like the riots-poems 1946-47 or that image of the leper licking water from a city hydrant. However, there are few instances where both poets use images of Nature to inspire awe sometimes encountering the sublime was far from being a pleasurable experience. The classic description is that of William Wordsworth as he recounted climbing the Alps and crossing the Simplon Pass in his autobiographical poem "The Prelude. Surrounded by crags and waterfalls, the poet felt himself to be in the presence of the divine— and experienced an emotion close to terror:

The immeasurable height of woods decaying, never to be decayed, The stationary blasts of waterfalls, And in the narrow rent at every turn Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn, The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky, The rocks that muttered close upon our ears, Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side As if a voice were in them, the sick sight And giddy prospect of the raving stream, The unfettered clouds and region of the Heavens, Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light Were all like workings of one mind, the features Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree; Characters of the great Apocalypse, The types and symbols of Eternity, Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.

This was no stroll in the mountains, not a journey towards of non-human Nature. What Wordsworth described was not religious experience, the symbols he detected in this wilderness landscape were more supernatural than natural as can be found in ‘Night of the Wind’ where Jibanananda describes the fierce wind which brings with it souls from an ancient time and vivid animal images.

“In The Preface to the Lyrical Ballads” Wordsworth states that the poet does not simply imitate the world, but “throw[s] over” incidents and situations from common life” “a certain colouring of imagination” the imagination being that part of the human mind that creates poetry. Jibanananda’s singularity lies in his ability to perceive beauty in the unacknowledged and small objects of Nature, and in that sense, he truly made ordinary Bengal beautiful in the eyes of his readers. Stock words like “wild, dark, lonely, light, dream” appear over and over in his poetry the same application stands for Jibanananda with his talks of the strange beauty of owl, mouse, crow, duck, shalik darkness the akanda shrub, the dhundul, fireflies, the moon. In this context, Rabindranath who consciously or subconsciously affected and continues to affect every other Bengali poet after him and has been identified as a true Romantic in his response to Nature would be more like Wordsworth in his unfaltering quest for true spirituality and inspiration in Nature.

Abrams asserts that “although Wordsworth sang of joy and love, he did not avert his eyes from anguish or evil, but often represents a “dark world”. He also says that “Wordsworth is pre-eminently the poet of solitude... no poet is more emphatically the poet of community”. Wordsworth, therefore, has an acute sense of his being that sharpens his awareness of other beings, and he intends to require us his audience to acknowledge the being of his narrative personae and so to bring them within the range of conscience and natural sympathy. Elsewhere- William Wordsworth’s ‘Nature’ points us away from the closed world of ethnocentric symbol of making towards the unstable world of post-modern meaning. Here Jibanananda is deviating from the” acute sense of his being that sharpens his awareness of other beings” and in a majority of poems perfects the art of being just the silent observer. Though Wordsworth in many of his poems directly articulates his beliefs there are somewhere he assumes the role of the mute observer only recording incidents-

In the poem entitled “The Excursion,” Wordsworth describes Nature’s play upon the earth’s surface just after a storm.

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More keenly than elsewhere in night's blue vault
Sparkle the stars, as of their station proud
Thoughts are not busier in the mind of man
Then the mute agents stirring there — alone
Here do I sit and watch.

In terms of locating the self within Nature Jibanananda's approach would alternate between a silent fascinated observer and displaying a Keatsian negative capability of sensuous oneness with objects of Nature certainly accompanied by that hallmark death wish.

Wordsworth on the other hand would be more of a prescriptionist who would always be conscious of the changes occurring within him and try to trace them—prelude being a case in point. Jibanananda on the other “is best when he is the observer” and loses appeal when he tries to address political and religious issues A Nature-worshipper, not a Platonist or Pantheist; he is rather a pagan who loves the things of Nature sensuously, not as tokens or symbols, nor as patterns of perfection, but simply because they are what they are (Bose, 58). But there can be no doubt that both poets effectively use the Nature mechanism to transcend the contemporary. The tired traveller in Banalata Sen claims he gets rejuvenated by Bengal, Bengal's Nature, its deep solace and shelter, so to speak. As he says:

For thousands of years, I roamed the paths of this earth,
From waters around Sri Lanka, in dead of night, to seas up the Malabar co
Much have I wandered, I was there in the grey world of Asoka
And of Bimbisara, pressed on through darkness to the city of Vidarbha.
I am a weary heart surrounded by life's frothy ocean.
To me, she gave a moment's peace—BanalataSen from Natore. (trans. by Seely in Parabaas)

And in Wordsworth-

I travelled among unknown men,/In lands beyond the sea;
Nor, England! did I know till then/What love I bore to thee.
'Tis past, that melancholy dream!/Nor will I quit thy shore
A second time; for still I seem/ To love thee more and more.
Among thy mountains did I feel/The joy of my desire;
And she I cherished turned her wheel/Beside an English fire.

Thy mornings showed thy nights concealed/ The bowers where Lucy played;
And thine too is the last green field/That Lucy's eyes surveyed.

Here we have to remember that while comparing the poems Lucy and Bonolota Sen not only symbolize the English countryside and rural Bengal but also articulate the theme of death, a recurrent theme for both poets though singularly different in connotation elsewhere. Whereas in Wordsworth we find the elusive Lucy against the backdrop of the countryside-at different ages whose untimely death provokes a deep response for Jibanananda. Bonolota Sen appears in two poems by name and lives in Suranjana, Shyamali, Suchetana and the other women-though these women fulfil different poetic needs. Here lies Sarojini —I do not know if she lies here... trans-Utpal Kumar Basu-A Certain Sense

For Wordsworth Lucy and other female forms-the reaper in The Solitary Reaper are central protagonists in the poems but for Jibanananda Bonolota Sen is more symbolic in Nature-critics have observed that she can stand for Nature, Death, Rural Bengal and a host of other interpretations-

She dwelt among the untrodden ways/Beside the springs of Dove,
A Maid whom there were none to praise/And very few to love:
She lived unknown, and few could know/When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and, oh,/The difference to me!

1.3. Emotions Recollected in Tranquillity: The importance of Memory

Memory plays an important in the poems of both poets-" emotion mixed with desire"- in Wordsworth-Tintern Abbey- the Abbey" is not so much about the landscape of the Wye valley in 1798 as it is about the landscape of memory—Wordsworth's memory. And that landscape is natural and harmonious. During his five years' absence from the valley, Wordsworth suggests, the tranquil environs of Tintern Abbey have been constantly present with him, in the "beauteous forms" stored in his memory. Notice the contrasts that Wordsworth establishes between civilization and Nature, the "din/Of towns and cities" and the "murmur" of the river Wye, the "fretful stir" and "fever of the world" and the peaceful meandering of the "sylvan Wye!" When Wordsworth has been troubled with the ways of the "unintelligible world," he asserts, remembering Nature has not only brought him peace but has also given him insight "into the life of things." Through an act of memory—specifically, through reflecting on natural scenes—Wordsworth discovers a spirit that connects all life.

“Tintern Abbey” tries to record a moment of revelation, when Wordsworth suddenly realized that Nature and acts of memory had given him insight into the life of things. the interplay of “remember” and “forget” in the final lines of Wordsworth’s address. Again, memory is an essential concern of “Tintern Abbey.” How we remember the past was a subject of the early stanzas; why we remember it is a question raised by Wordsworth’s desperate plea “Nor wilt thou then forget.” Jibanananda will, time and again, revert to Barisal and his memories of Nature as an escape from the harsh City life of Bengal. Jibanananda in One day Eight Years Ago would deal graphically with the theme of suicide. The gloating of the owl, the solemn tree from which the common man hangs himself are presented but the reason for the suicide is kept a mystery” he just had a wish to die!”. In his graphic study of death with mention of the room of dissection he would identify with the detachment of Eliot and the entire poem is written in the form of a reportage-there are no revelations, no sudden epiphanies. Against this we consider Wordsworth as a dedicated spirit, prophet, teacher”, and teaching and prophecy were based on his own experience

Conclusion

The Romantic emphasis on the individual was reflected in ideas of self-realization and Nature. The poetic sensibilities of Wordsworth and Jibanananda can be linked through the conviction that the individual could directly understand Nature without the need for society and social artifice

The poetry of Wordsworth and Jibanananda is characterized by a deep sense of patriotism-for Wordsworth the English countryside and for Jibanananda the rural Bengal. This is achieved through a graphic description of Nature. Nature symbolizes a sense of shelter and peace. Nature also symbolizes other things- for Wordsworth Nature assumes almost a spiritual significance, a teacher who instigates self-introspection. Receptive to both the happy and anxious sensations that form Wordsworth’s ‘modern imagination’, he reveals it as a spirit that is ‘only gradually humanized’ by Nature and human relationship, always in danger of falling into solipsism but rescued by the habitual rhythms of everyday life that reproduce the world in terms of joy.

For Jibanananda the symbolic significance of Nature is complex -His preferred images of the owl vulture and the mouse, the season of Autumn and the falling leaves, the deer and the hunt are a representation of an unfamiliar, uncharted expression for traditional

Bengali readers of poetry. In this context Jibanananda echoes W. B. Yeats. Both poets use images that later evolve into powerful symbols of Death, Futility and also of Hope.

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